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Words

Happiness

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1) A philosophical question

'What is happiness?' In these words one sometimes seeks a resolution of certain philosophical difficulties: Is happiness the satisfaction one obtains when one's desires are satisfied? Is it the capacity to be pleased with what one has and to enjoy what one does? Is the happy person one who enjoys life or one who has attained inner peace? How far does a person's happiness depend on his state of soul, his values and attitudes to things, and how far on his external circumstances. What can one do to be happy? Can the desire for happiness be anything other than a form of self-seeking? These and other questions come crowding in. Yet they do not come from ignorance. One who asks them knows well enough what the word means and what he or she is talking about. They are an expression of perplexity and seek for an order in one's apprehension of what is familiar territory, for a clearer view of the application of the concept of happiness and its relations to a host of other concepts: enjoyment, pleasure, satisfaction, gladness, joy, doing what one wants, contentment, serenity, virtue, and many others.

It is worth noting that the words 'What is happiness?' may also express a request for something different: for one's conception of happiness to be made explicit. This involves bringing out what one considers to be of supreme importance in life. Here too one is called on to reflect on what one already knows, on 'what lies open to view'. But what is in question here is not the application of and the connections between concepts with which speakers of one's language are familiar. What is in question are one's own thoughts, attitude to life, desires and ambitions, beliefs and values. The question this time calls for self-reflection, and this bears a certain resemblance to philosophical reflection. It may even lead one to certain philosophical questions and so come to be intertwined with philosophical reflection.

Two people can thus attach the same meaning to the word 'happiness' and yet have very different conceptions of happiness. Consequently they may differ over whether or not someone is happy, as Socrates and Polus differed over whether Archelaus, the Macedonian tyrant, was a happy man or not (1). But there are other ways in which people can differ in their answer to such a question. There is room for disagreement here even when the man whose happiness is in question is well known to the disagreeing parties. For whether or not a man is happy can only be gathered from his life, his words and actions, and it is not always easy to know what to make of them. Even the person in question may not always find this an easy matter. In the novel *H M Pulham Esq*, (2) by John P Marquand, the hero likens such reflection to 'having a lot of numbers that don't look alike and don't mean anything until you add them all together'. But it is easy to make mistakes, and these are not like mistakes in arithmetic.

Key words
Philosophy; happiness.

2) Happiness and our outer circumstances

Does happiness depend on our own powers or on our circumstances, and even on what are matters of accident? People say: 'I am happy that you could come', 'I am happy to make your acquaintance'. They thus express their pleasure with various things. They are glad to have the company of someone they like, pleased to meet someone of whom they have heard much before. These are moments that brighten their day, moments that come and go, although their content is determined by what precedes and what follows them. Much has to have come together for me to be glad now, at this moment; much that cannot be identified without reference to what takes place at other moments of my life.

Certainly those things that make a man glad, the things that he appreciates, enjoys, feels grateful for, are the things that make him happy. But for a man to be happy there must not only be things for him to be glad about, he must also have the capacity to be glad. He must be able to take an interest in people, enjoy things, be able to forgive those who hurt him, to feel grateful for what he has. This is something that comes from him. So the source of whatever happiness one finds in life also lies within one. If a person didn't care for people, was not interested in anything, did not appreciate the good things of life, nothing could make him happy. Although nothing could pain him either and, in that sense, make him unhappy, he would suffer from *ennui*, a sense of futility, which is a form of

unhappiness. Unless a person cares for something or other he cannot find happiness – although caring for things exposes him to the risk of unhappiness through grief, disappointment, hurt, and even guilt and remorse. But as I said, while indifference insulates him from certain forms of unhappiness, it exposes him to others, those that are rooted in inner poverty.

Gladness is a response to what comes one's way or what one comes to know. Thus I respond to my friend's good fortune with gladness; I find pleasure in it. Gladness is a way of apprehending his good fortune; it is a pleasurable apprehension of it. It is also a state of soul. It is what my friend's good fortune, apprehended with pleasure, makes of me, what I become in relation to it. Thus I become glad or joyful when the pleasure is intense. The person who has joy in his heart wants to exteriorise it. He may thus want to sing or dance. These are forms of celebration – the celebration of the happy occasion, the joyous event. Gladness smiles, it is welcoming; joy sings, it celebrates. These are expressions of happiness, expressions of the happy man's state of soul.

Genuine happiness is vulnerable. Since the genuinely happy person is one who cares for things he is exposed to pain and disappointment. A happiness that is not in this way vulnerable borders on smugness. The smug person lacks awareness of what is difficult and problematic in life, his concern for other people does not go deep. Smugness is a form of shallowness; the smile of the smug is self-satisfied. In contrast, the person who is capable of being unhappy could be said to be in touch with what is painful in life. Thus compassion is a form of such contact.

While genuine happiness is vulnerable, in the sense indicated, this does not make it unstable. Its vulnerability comes from the person's accessibility to what is painful, while its stability comes from its 'inner dimension'. Those whose happiness lacks stability are those who take too much from those situations that make them happy without putting anything into them. Their happiness is a bubble which is easily pierced by a change in their circumstances. Their soul is a mirror which reflects the passage of outer events without being able to hold in their impact, without being able to make that impact part of itself. Their happiness does not go deep, it is all on the surface and gives their soul no sustenance.

Thus one can be related differently to those events which make one glad or joyful, and this relation is an expression of the kind of person one is. Where it is a form of passivity, where the soul basks in the warmth of a moment of gladness, the happiness it finds will be evanescent. When the warmth is removed the chill will set in. Where a person cares deeply he will radiate the pleasure he finds in a happy moment, give pleasure to those who are part of it, and he will be transformed in the process in the way I suggested before. Gladness will permeate his whole soul. For a person can be touched by what is pleasurable, just as he can be touched by what is painful. Such a person will have the capacity to weather sadness and disappointment without letting these things colour the whole aspect under which he sees life. It may take a sense of proportion, humour, patience, trust or courage to withstand this, but certainly a person can be happy and remain cheerful, in the face of adversity, without losing his sensibility of it. And some religious writers have even spoken of a happiness which no adversity can destroy. But I do not now propose to go into the question of how that is possible.

3) Happiness and contentment

I spoke of gladness and joy and the way these are generally directed outwards, even though they can take root in the soul of the person who feels them. They are primarily a person's response to what exists independently of him, and only secondarily are they states of soul, what the person becomes in relation to what makes him glad or joyful. Though we do speak of being contented with this thing or that, contentment is primarily a state of soul. A contented person is pleased with what he has, satisfied with his lot. That is he doesn't want more, or something different; he does not think that what he has is not good enough, or that what he is falls short of what it ought to be. He is at peace with himself.

Contentment is an expression of self-acceptance, of having found what one wants. But it is not a form of acquiescence. The contented person may have to fight for what he believes in and what he wants. He is as upset as anyone else when things go wrong, though not in the same way. His disappointment or pain remains confined to its object. It does not alter his view of himself, nor his view of the world; he does not lose sight of the things he has trusted, found support in, and thought worthwhile. The contented man, one could say, is 'in harmony with the universe'. He is happy to let things be as they are in the sense that he does not have to have them a certain way so that he can believe in himself. Consequently when they change his confidence in himself is not threatened.

At least one antithesis of contentment is greed and envy. Another one is a bad conscience.

Contentment is unobtrusive; when it purrs it has already changed into smugness. Such smugness is to contentment what manic exuberance is to joyfulness.

4) Happiness and authenticity

We sometimes confuse contentment with satiety and happiness with having what one wants. We think that if a man does all he wants to do he must be happy and that, therefore, it is in seeking pleasure and satisfaction that happiness is to be found. It seems then that restraint and discipline are necessary obstacles to happiness.

We find such a view in Freud's *Civilisation and its Discontents* (3), though I do not myself believe that it represents what Freud really wanted to say. The view

that is distorted here by various philosophical confusions is that some inner conflict is inevitable in the course of an individual's development towards greater autonomy and that dealing with it by repression preserves the conflict, blocks its resolution, and perpetuates self-division. While Freud here identifies civilisation with repression, he has himself clearly distinguished, in some of his other writings, between repression and self-restraint, and he appreciates the importance of standards and discipline for the learning of self-restraint.

I have already pointed out that contentment is not satiety but freedom from greed. The inner peace of which it is an expression does not come from the satisfaction of one's desires, but from having found what one wants in life. This involves the reorganisation of one's desires around certain beliefs, concerns and interests. That means the subordination of some desires to others, their relinquishment or their transformation in the context of new activities in which one learns to take part. This is part of learning and emotional development, and it takes place against the grain of inclinations that one clings to, and of fears, resentments and anxieties which prevent one from making what is new one's own and changing in the process. In my reading of it this is absolutely central to Freud's conception of individual development or 'the development of the ego' as he called it. Finding out what one wants also involves the taking on of new responsibilities and the making of certain crucial choices: making certain beliefs one's own, endorsing certain desires and inclinations, rejecting or repudiating others – this latter is to be distinguished from what Freud called 'repression'.

Giving way to greed is the very opposite of what is in question. The greedy man does not know what he wants. Greed is an expression of perpetual dissatisfaction, of an inner emptiness. In contrast, the convictions, interests and concerns which the man who knows what he wants has made his own give him a fullness of being which is the antithesis of the inner emptiness of the greedy man who finds no sustenance in what he seeks. In pursuing his interests, in living in accordance with his convictions he finds growth, fulfilment and happiness.

A person who does what he wants is not necessarily a selfish man, nor is he necessarily one who seeks pleasure and satisfaction. Whether he is selfish or not depends on what he wants. Certainly a man who pursues his interests is not seeking satisfaction. In any case, satisfaction is not what one seeks when one pursues the object of one's desires, even though when one obtains that object one necessarily obtains satisfaction – not self-satisfaction, but the satisfaction of one's desires.

Similarly for pleasure and enjoyment. A man who enjoys nothing, one who finds no pleasure in anything, cannot find any happiness in life. This is what I claimed earlier when I said that a man cannot find happiness in what leaves him cold or indifferent. However, to say this is not to advocate a life of pleasure. The antithesis of what I am trying to bring into focus is alienation and inauthenticity, of which there are many different forms. It is these that one claims exclude the possibility of a happy life. One may, for instance, be thinking of a person in whose life everything is a burden, a chore, where everything is done as a duty – eg Mrs Solness in Ibsen's play *The Master Builder*, or one whose actions are subordinated to the desire of keeping up appearances – eg Ivan Ilytch in Tolstoy's story *The Death of Ivan Ilytch*.

To say 'Do what you want' need not be to give a person licence. It need not mean: 'If you *want* to do something, then that is all right. Go ahead and do it', or: 'Ignore what other people want'. In one common usage it means: 'Whatever you do, be sure that it is what *you* want'. In other words: 'Do what you, yourself, believe in and endorse. Be sure that you are behind what you do, that what you do comes from you'. As far as *what* one is to do is concerned the above injunction leaves the field wide open. It only asks that the agent should be the one who determines that. It speaks about his relation to what he does, whatever that may be, not its content.

It is *this* that is presented as a precondition of happiness in the words: 'Do what you want if you want to be happy'. But it is distorted in the thought that happiness can only be found in a life of pleasure, or in self-seeking, and that accepting any limitation to such a pursuit must be detrimental to a person's chances of being happy (hence Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias* (4)).

5) The pursuit of happiness

'If you want to be happy . . .' If one assumes that people want to be happy, what is it that one assumes? That this is the driving force behind people's actions? That in what they do and in the way they arrange their lives people are engaged, however clumsily or misguidedly, in the pursuit of happiness? In his more speculative moments Freud fell into the error of thinking so. Thus in *Civilisation and its Discontents* he asks 'what the behaviour of men reveals as to the purpose and object of their lives' and answers that men 'seek happiness, they want to become happy and remain so' (5). Further down he says that 'the force behind all human activities is a striving towards the two convergent aims of profit and pleasure' (6).

Freud was a psychotherapist and people came to see him because they were unhappy in different ways. They sought relief from their sufferings. But from the fact that people who are unhappy would like to see an amelioration of their condition it does not follow that they engage in the various pursuits that fill their lives in order to attain happiness or maintain whatever happiness they have achieved. Even if we were to say that people want to be happy, what would this really amount to? No more than that other things being equal everyone would like to be happy, that no one would be unhappy from choice. To say this, however, is not to

deny that men are often willing to put up with suffering and unhappiness for what they believe and for the people they love. Engrossed in activities to which they give themselves they think little about their happiness and care little about the dangers and discomforts to which these activities may expose them. The fact that they are behind their actions, that they put up with pain and discomfort willingly, does not mean that they do so for the sake of some reward in which they will find happiness.

To say that 'men want to be happy' in this qualified sense is one thing, to say that they want the different things they seek as a means to happiness is quite another thing. In fact, happiness is something that always eludes those who seek it directly. Understandably, since it has no substance of its own. It is not something over and above the different things in which men find happiness. The moment any one of them is made into a *means* to happiness it can no longer bring happiness.

One may, of course, be unhappy and reflect on where one has gone wrong in one's life. One may feel one has lost one's way in life and give expression to one's consternation in the words, 'I wish I knew what I wanted'. This search is sometimes described as a search for happiness. But what is being sought is not the means to happiness; it is something that the person can make sense of, see some point in, perhaps an occupation in which he can find an interest and grow. In it he would find happiness. He must be careful, however, not to let it become an evasion from what troubles him, a way of filling in the void within him. There will be this danger if he thinks too much in terms of finding happiness.

References

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(2) Marquand J P. *H M Pulham esq*, 320. Quoted by Wisdom J. Gods. In: *Philosophy and psycho-analysis*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1953: 153.
(3) Freud S. *Civilisation and its discontents*. London: Hogarth Press, 1949.
(4) See reference (1) 91. See especially Callicles's opening speech, 76–82.
(5) See reference (3) 26–27.
(6) See reference (3) 57–58.

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